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WASHINGTON - Under heavy scrutiny for failing to pay [Post-9/11 GI Bill](#) benefits to eligible veterans, the program's lead administrator attempted to explain the delays to a Congressional subcommittee here Thursday.

In testimony before the House of Representatives Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Keith M. Wilson suggested a deluge of applications, outmoded technology and poor communication had all contributed to a backlog of nearly 30,000 unpaid benefits packages. Under the harshest questioning of the day, issued by Rep. Harry Mitchell (D-Ariz.), the director of the education service at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs made an emotional appeal.

"I can say firsthand I know exactly what these students are going through," said Wilson, who served in the Navy before going to college on the GI Bill. "I know what it's like to stand in line for food stamps after defending this nation for eight years. I take this very personally and we're going to fix it."

The fix, however, may be some time coming. The department's working goal is to pay out all eligible benefits by the start of the spring semester, which Wilson conceded could "theoretically" mean some veterans will go through the entire fall semester without receiving full benefits. That said, Wilson testified that he had not heard of any colleges kicking veterans out because they haven't received the benefits to which they are entitled.

Throughout his questioning, Mitchell suggested Congress had not been made aware of the backlog problems until it was already too late.

"Once you knew you were running into problems, why didn't you come back to us? We heard it first from the veterans and the *Army Times*," Mitchell said.

The Congressman added that the department should think "long and hard" before awarding bonuses this year, equating any such payouts with the controversial bonuses made by financial

firms that received federal bailout dollars. Speaking with reporters after the hearing, Wilson said bonuses were deserved, emphasizing the hard work of employees who have worked mandatory overtime to address the problem.

"I have had people standing in front of my desk crying because they don't know which way to turn," he said.

But under questioning from Mitchell, Wilson did not dispute that the department has failed to meet deadlines.

"You rightly call us out in not providing timely service to all veterans," he said.

To fully process an application, the department has to use four separate computer systems - none of which are integrated at this point, Wilson said. Consequently, it takes about 1 ½ hours to fully process a single application, he said. The department has hired an additional 230 people to help handle the applications, and the computer system should be fully automated by December 2010, he said.

GI Bill By the Numbers

Applications Received

275,000

Veterans Eligible for Benefits

213,000

Veterans Who Have Received Full Payment

52,500

Eligible Veterans Yet to Receive Any or Total Benefit

29,500

Eligible Veterans Enrolled in College

82,000

Veterans Receiving Advanced Payments of Up to \$3,000

50,000

Eligible Veterans Yet to Enroll Anywhere

131,000

Communication Breakdown

[News reports](#) have placed the number of unpaid eligible veterans in the hundreds of thousands, but Wilson offered a much lower figure in his testimony Thursday. There are currently 29,500 eligible veterans who enrolled in college this fall and have received none of or only a portion of their benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Wilson said. To assist those veterans, the department began providing advance [payments of as much as \\$3,000](#) to eligible students, but that figure is well below what some may be eligible for under the bill.

Reports of a significantly larger backlog were the result of miscommunication, Wilson said. In some cases, media outlets subtracted the number of fully paid veterans from the number of veterans who applied or were eligible, he said. That number was misleading, because far fewer veterans actually enrolled in college than the number who applied or were eligible. Indeed, some 131,000 of the 213,000 eligible veterans (about 62 percent of the total pool) haven't enrolled anywhere, Wilson said.

The communication breakdown hasn't just been with reporters, however. Many veterans were clearly unaware that housing allowances, for instance, would not be paid out at the same time as other benefits. Given the confusion, several subcommittee members said they had constituents who were left scrambling to afford a place to live.

If there was a recurring theme throughout Thursday's hearing, it was the notion that the Department of Veterans Affairs has allowed problems to fester without coming clean to Congress. As the hearing came to a close, Rep. John Adler (D-N.J.) reiterated that more prompt communication is expected.

"We would like to hear from you as needs arise," he said, "before crises arise."